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ABSTRACT

The general enthusiasm that governs composition studies is the result of more than 20 years of collective efforts to define central issues in theory and research, and to help refocus national attention on composition literacy. The optimistic vision of future challenge and direction in discourse studies is largely premised on Thomas Kuhn's "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions." Of particular relevance is the application of the notion of "paradigm shift" to the dichotomy between the categories "current-traditional" and "process," as well as the view that Kuhn's metatheory works as well for the humanities and social sciences as it does for the natural sciences. However, problems arise when using the Kuhnian paradigm in composition studies and this paper develops the points that: (1) the concept of paradigm shift as a viable descriptor for what is about to happen, is happening, or has happened in composition studies remains highly questionable; (2) the risks involved in pursuing a multidisciplinary and multimodal approach may well outweigh any advantages; and (3) a more cautious and restrained approach to the uses of analogic terminology in making connections between composition and other disciplines would be in the best, long-range interests of the profession. (Thirty-three references are attached.) (RS)

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CONSTRAINTS ON THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH: USES AND MISUSES OF THE KUHNIAN PARADIGM

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The general enthusiasm that governs composition studies today is the result of more than twenty years of collective efforts to define central issues in theory and research, and to help refocus national attention on composition literacy. In a period when many traditional English departments are suffering from divisiveness and fragmentation, which has oftentimes created morale problems among our colleagues, composition scholars seem more charged than ever with infectious enthusiasm for the intellectual excitements of their own energized studies. Certainly, one of the most articulate proponents of this view is Maxine Hairston, whose article, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing" (1982) reads as a clarion call for the "revolution" now allegedly in progress. Another such voice is Janice Lauer, who paints a future for composition studies in terms that evokes a kind of Spenserian landscape and knightly adventure:

> The vastness and density of the problem domain itself offer a rich field of inquiry for the enterprising, but a terrain of quicksand for the unwary. The immensity of unexplored land presents a subtle seduction, drawing newcomers because it promises not to relegate them to

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> tiny plots in which to work out the arcane implications of already established scholarship. But once committed, some individuals have difficulty finding entries or end up losing their way, because the role of pathfinder is challenging and thus ill-suited to everyone. The field's largely unmapped domain, therefore, has rewarded some handsomely but been fatal to others. [p. 21]

For Lauer the "advantages" and "risks" are directly related to the multidisciplinary character (referencing other domains in order to locate meaningful inquiry points) of the discipline, as well as to its multimodal dimensions (appropriating modes of inquiry from other fields) in order to achieve meaningful research results and conclusions. Multimodality, Lauer suggests, though, is a mixed blessing. Its advantages, on the one hand, are: (1) that it "helps scholars to avoid a nearsightedness that overlooks many and sometimes even the most significant problems in a field because they exist outside the walls of a particular mode of inquiry"; (2) that it cultivates reciprocity among the modes and avoids wasteful exercises in the reinvention of the wheel; and (3) that it provides for "a hierarchical perspective through which to view problems rather than methods as ends." In short, that it helps composition studies to avoid becoming "mesmerized by measurement instruments."

Its disadvantages, however, are (1) that there is considerable risk of "building an elaborate edifice on sand" in the sense that essential definitions and boundaries remain unclear and that the discipline acquires no specific sense of its own contexts, history or domain. Also, (2) that it reveals a tendency, as Douglas Park suggests, to underestimate "the real difficulties of mastering different methodologies" and may result in intellectual amateurism. Similarly,

there is risk in violating domain boundaries and practicing a careless disregard for cautious application of modalities and discipline specific claims and warrants. And, instead of cultivating reciprocity, there is the danger of violating reciprocity; instead of achieving a perspective, there is the danger of losing all perspective. Certainly, multimodality imposes a very considerable burden on scholars and graduate programs to provide an adequate training which provides for a comprehensive knowledge of the context, history and status that the referent has within its own field or domain. Such intellectual comprehensiveness imposes a particularly heavy responsibility, Lauer also notes, on members of the discipline, and becomes even heavier "as multidisciplinary scholarship accumulates and begins achieving the status of received tradition."

Both Hariston's and Lauer's optimistic vision of future challenge and direction in discourse studies is largely premised on their readings of Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962, 1970), which provides the necessary warrants for most of their assertions and claims. Of particular relevance is the application of the notion of paradigm shift to the dichotomy between the categories "current-traditional" and "process," as well as the view that Kuhn's metatheory works as well for the humanities and social sciences as it does for the natural sciences. As North shows, however, such belief in paradigm shifts and "revolutions" is indicative more of what he calls "an inter-methodological struggle for power" within the profession itself than it does an agreed upon response to what is called a "crisis" in composition studies. And the assumption (as Hairston, Lauer, Young and others have argued) that we are in paradigm shift is, itself, as North also points

out, a view which is itself premised on the **a priori** assumption that "composition - if it can even now be called a discipline at all - can really be assumed ever to have had this sort of a paradigmatic structure."

Basic to the argument of this paper is the view that (1) the concept of paradigm shift as a viable descriptor for either what is about to happen, is happening, or has happened in composition studies remains highly questionable; (2) that the risks involved in pursuing a multi-disciplinary and multimodal approach may well outweigh any advantages, and that there are historical precedents showing clear instances of misapplication (sometimes having dangerous, even disastrous, consequences); and (3) that a more cautious and restrained approach to the uses of analogic terminology in making connections between our own and other disciplines would be in the best, long-range interests of the profession. This view is essentially in accord with Steven North's critique in his The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field (1987); he makes the following essential criticisms about the philosophizing tendencies within the discipline: (1) that oftentimes the philosophy gets mixed with the proselytizing; (2) that considerable inquiry has been "painfully careless" and that "the community's interests have consistently run wider than they have deep"; and (3) that most so-called philosophical arguments have "so far failed to generate any direct response, and even fewer have been assimilated into any sustained dialectic." [see pp.91-115]. He describes the dominant intellectual strategy as "foraging" and the typical process by which claims are treated as facts rather than premises:

> . . . the Composition Philosopher makes a foray into some field outside Composition itself, works to reach some degree of expertise in it, then returns ready to work out an argument about the nature of doing, learning, or teaching writing on the basis of the foraged premises. [p.102]

In an unpublished paper presented at the 1982 Conference on College Composition and Communication, John Gary Tallman--speaking from the perspective of a practicing scientist--also spoke critically of the Kuhnian applications. Following the lead of earlier Kuhnian critics like Dudley Shapers, Frederick Suppe and Karl Popper, Tallman complained of a tendency towards a "cross-pollinization of jargon" between the sciences and non-sciences. He not only questioned the view that composition studies are in either a pre-paradigm or paradigm state but suggested that the propositional answer is really irrelevant. "Revolutions" tend to occur independent of any well-defined recognition; should, whatever is mislabeled a revolution occur in composition, it will most probably be a synthesis of contributions from "both product-oriented [current-traditional] and process-oriented activities in order to articulate the manner in which a successful composition is produced." A similar idea is expressed also by the psychologist, Jerome Kagan, who writes that "it is almost a general truth that the understanding of every complex phenomenon requires an appreciation of complementary concepts." [p.xii]. Kagan paraphrases the great chemist Neils Bohr to the effect that whichever theory one choses about the composition of matter--particles or wave--by considering both "one gains a deeper appreciation of nature than if only one perspective is used." Blum, in his response to Hairston's article, invites us to consider the dialectic rather than the

paradigm shift as, possibly, more accurately descriptive of whatever changes are actually occurring:

> Suppose that progress in pedagogy takes not the form of revolutionary paradigm shifts between dichotomous alternatives, but rather the form of complex, ongoing Hegelian dialectics in which manifold theses and antitheses contained within mutually inclusive systems of thought continuously seek resolution. If such is the case, then Hairston's reductive view distorts the multi-dimensional activity it claims to clarify, and thereby impedes, rather than spurs, understanding and progress. [pp. 490-491]

This illustrates exactly the problem--and the dilemma: how is an explanation that proports, on the one hand, to extend its inquiry into other domains consistent with an explanation of change that precludes conversation between adherents of conflicting viewpoints within its own domain? Virtually every critic of Kuhn has focused on the incommensurability problem; namely, that since there is no "neutral observation language," paradigmists are incapable of effectively communicating with groups other than themselves. To the extent that, as Shapere says, "two paradigms cannot be judged according to their ability to solve the same problems, or deal with the same facts, or meet the same standards," [p.391] we face a reductivist and divisive analytical situation. On this basis alone, it would then seem that the Kuhnian application works counter to what Lauer has described as the special appeal of discourse study, its being "permeated with a sense of community" and an environment where "new work attempts to build on previous studies rather than to ridicule or demolish them." Obviously, a commitment to paradigm shift would inevitably polarize intellectual discussion and negate the function of continuous debate. Further, since

the advancement of new knowledge, in Kuhnian terms, occurs by "qualitative leaps over gulfs of incommensurabililty," [Connors, p.2] rather than by gradual accretion ("normal science"), the whole sense of community and supportive environments would be seriously impacted. The litmus test would be less a case of "better theories driving out poorer ones" than it would be a question of loyalty-decisions made by a community where commitment becomes more political and sociological than epistomologically based. Thus, as Tallman correctly notes, allegiances become more a matter of belief than of analysis:

> A strict application of these Kuhnian tenents would suggest that in composition, the transition between the 'current-traditional' paradigm and a 'process' paradigm is not a matter of acquiring more compelling data, leading to revised pedagogy, as much as a 'conversion' to a new framework and new nomenclature through a rhetorical debate. [pp. 9-10]

Interesting enough, Hairston, in her reply to Blom's acerbic attack on her "Winds of Change" article admits as much:

> I will not attempt to refute Mr. Blom's accusations about my view of the profession. Obviously he and I see a different reality. Nor will I deny that I am a zealot in the cause of teaching writing as process. I tell the administrators of the departments and schools I visit as a consultant that I am out preaching revolution and subversion, and indeed I am. [p.494, my italics]

Clearly, "conversion" to a new paradigm in the Kuhnian universe is based on the possibilities of consensus agreements by individuals acting collectively. And, it is assumed that, in the realm of social knowledge, discoveries which are capable of validation can only be achieved through the conscious and generalized recognition of mutually compatible interests. Thomas Farrell, in "Knowledge, Consensus and Rhetorical

Theory" (1976) makes the observation that the special characteristics of social knowledge are that (1) it is neither discoverable nor verifiable through the kind of detachment which 'technical/specialized' knowledge presumes, but (2) is dependent upon some personal relationship with other actors in the social world. It is a knowledge that is neither 'fixed,' 'permanent' nor static but is 'probable' knowledge, and always in "a state of potential or indeterminance" to be validated through the reasoned judgment and action of an audience. [p.9] It is, rather, knowledge which is always transitional and generative.

That Composition has achieved the levels of collective activity, or that it has been able to define "mutually compatible interests," is certainly absent any current consensus. Scholars like Connors and North raise serious questions about the coherence of our knowledge and note that, while it is safe to calls ours a "field," it is far more dubious to suggest it is a "discipline." North's assessment of the situation is instructive:

> It might not be too much to claim, in fact, that for all the rhetoric about unity in pursuit of one or another goal, Composition as a knowledge-making society is gradually pulling itself apart. Not branching out or expanding, although these might be politically more palatable descriptions, but fragmenting: gathering into communities or clusters of communities among which relations are becoming increasingly tenuous. [p.364]

Whatever definitional or conceptual problems exist in Composition Studies, there still remains certain inconsistencies and practical problems for those who would try to justify the Kuhnian explanation along Farrell's lines. It seems to imply that the "revolution" would occur through the concentric expansion of the community-forming group. As more

individuals achieved consensus agreement with the basic tenants of "process" discourse, the paradigm shift would eventually happen and be recognized. Depending on the speed of consensus, of course, the shift is either revolutionary (rapid) or evolutionary (slow). (Obviously, one wishes for rapid change in support of one's own beliefs or ideals and, I suspect, this urge accounts for the appeal of the paradigm shift notion--as a palliative for the frustrations of imperceptible movement).

Composition might consider the virtues of Karl Popper's less appealing, but more realistic, approach of "piecemeal engineering" as one antidote to these more utopian and holistic methods of discovery and change:

> The characteristic approach of the piecemeal engineer is this. Even though he may perhaps cherish some ideals which concern society 'as a whole'--its general welfare, perhaps--he does not believe in the method of redesigning it as a whole. Whatever his ends, he tries to achieve them by small adjustments and re-adjustments which can be continually improved upon. [p.66]

Such "piecemeal thinkering" as this, Popper admits, is not necessarily agreeable to those who seek more dramatic, rapid change. For Popper, though, such revolutionary change is unlikely to attain its intended ideals because "the greater the holistic changes attempted, the greater are their unintended and largely unexpected repercussions, forcing upon the holistic engineer the expedient of piecemeal improvization. [p.68]

Another problem with this ideal of a consensus agreement is also nicely expressed in what Martin Gardiner calls the "experimenter effect," something we are also not immune from:

> If the work is controversial there is a tendency for research teams to form a cluster of insiders deeply suspicious of outsiders. They become. . . a dedicated group of enthusiastic workers, one that constitutes a tightly knit social community with a solid core of shared beliefs and goals in opposition to outside visitors. . . . In fact, it is difficult to imagine a skeptic being taken in as a member of such a team. [p.395]

Membership--we should not delude ourselves--governs the rhetoric we use, the models we advocate, the alternatives we descry. This point is well stated and made at considerable length in Charles Bazerman's recent study, Shaping Written Knowledge: The Genre and Activity of the Experimental Article in Science (1988), where he demonstrates that much of the process of gaining scientific credibility consists of making "one's results seem not to be tied to the specifics of one's lab work" and that the final result often bears little resemblance to the actual processes involved in investigation. The artifice of scientific rhetoric is largely constructed via the demands of sustaining the claims of one's group and--oftentimes--arguing those claims effectively against any counter-claims of another community. Thus, as Bazerman notes

> . . . the sciences, or even one science, or a single specialty within science, is far from a single, unmixed discourse community. The more I looked at varieties of scientific texts, the more I saw, with Darwin, that variation is everywhere the rule. [p.6]

One illustration of certain problems we have been examining here in relation to the Kuhnian analysis can be seen in Louise Wetherbee Phelps' "The Dance of Discourse: A Dynamic, Relativistic View of Structure." While admitting that she lacks an adequate conceptual framework and appropriate models for research (also noted by Connors, North and others), Phelps remains unperturbed and thinks that such simply

characterizes the interactive nature of rhetoric's unique reality. "What is unique to composition studies," she writes, "is its synthesizing thrust and its pragmatic, ad hoc interpretation of scientific and humanistic knowledge" and that "it is the inescapable condition of such an effort that it attempts to make incomplete knowledge the basis of principled action."

Phelps' attempts to establish an analogic bridge between the "new physics" and the "new rhetoric" illustrates one of the problems of the multi-modal, multi-disciplinary approach. She builds her analogies on two texts that professional physicists treat with undisguised disdain, Fritjof Capra's The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism (1975) and Gary Zukav's The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics. (1979) Gardner's comments on Zukav is indicative of considerable professional scientific opinion:

> No physicist denies that the measurement of quantum systems disturbs them, but it does not follow that there isn't something "out there," independent of our minds, to be disturbed. It is a distinction that Zukav constantly blurs. The majority of today's physicists, as well as most philosophers of science, are "realists" who will find Zukav's subjective epistemology as vaguely defined as it is irritating. [p.376]

Having appropriated Kuhnian concepts to composition studies, it seems as if Phelps has given free license to, arbitrarily, draw from science those theoretical accounts which appear to support her particular hypothesis--even if those analogues are, themselves, at the fringe of accepted "normal" science. But one cannot have it both ways: if we argue for consensus agreement as a determing precondition for knowledge acceptance

in our own disciplines, then we should also respect that principle as it applies to other disciplines too. We are, perhaps, guilty in our own discipline of sometimes being overly attracted to the unorthodox and even audacious theories of science that have reflected more the mystical and visionary weltanschauungen analysis, than the more mundane and ordinary technical descriptions of everyday science. Thus, we tend to be more attracted to such accounts of phenomena as Immanuel Velikovsky's Worlds in Collision (1950) or Teilhard de Chardin's The Phenomenon of Man (1959), accounts which Stephen J. Gould has called our "penchant for building comprehensive and all-encompassing systems." [p.250]

One other issue worth noting is the way in which exaggerating crisis usually leads to an exaggerated rhetoric. In this sense we tend to succumb to what Christopher Lasch has called the "trivialization of crisis" where "the rhetoric of crisis and survival emasculates the idea of crisis and leaves us indifferent. . . . Nothing makes our attention wander so quickly as talk of another crisis." [p.64] This point is worth noting in the context of regarding some of the New Process rhetoric as a calculated hyperbole to effectively market the particular ideology. Maxine Hairston's admitted zealotry is certainly part of a marketing strategy to extend the size of the supporting community for her particular idea. The efforts to "sell" a new paradigm for composition becomes, uncomfortably, similar to marketing strategies where

> . . . ostensible competing products become increasingly indistinguishable and have to be promoted, therefore, by means of advertising that seeks to create the illusion of variety and to present these products as revolutionary breakthroughs, breathtaking advances of modern science and engineering, or, in the case of the products of the mind,

> as intellectual discoveries the consumption of which will bring instantaneous insight, success, or peace of mind.
> [Lasch, p.39]

One other tendency of paradigm builders can be seen also in the Phelps essay, particularly when she attempts to make immediate application of the theory to the practice. The following excerpt illustrates this common tendency, as well as pointedly demonstrating the confusion that sometimes exists between hypotheses and experimental claims:

> If some of us have professed something like a dynamic relativistic view of structure, or at least been quick to repudiate a static one, few if any composition professionals have really believed it enough to act on it. (Imagine a teacher picking up a student theme--not a literary text--and reading it with the consciousness of her role as participant in a dance of symbolic engeries which the text attempts to structure. . . or treating a scribbled list as the first manifestation of an emerging structure to be realized in a future text.) If we do come to take seriously an interactive view of written discourse and its structure, composition teaching and research will operate in a new world as unstable and exciting as that of early twentieth century physics, which Zukav describes as a picture of chaos beneath order, and of which Heisenberg wrote: '. . . the demand for change in the thought pattern may engender the feeling that the ground is to be pulled from under one's feet.' [p. 80-81]

It is clear, I think, that this mode of interdisciplinary analysis is counter-productive to the interests of the profession and reflects what Park calls "the spirit of the moment" and where the "unbridled call to be interdisciplinary" results in a methodological amateurism that reflects poorly on the integrity of the discipline. Connecting pedagogy to theory--a virtually habitual practice in composition studies--

oftentimes merely obfuscates the weaknesses or irrelevancies of the theoretical foundations in the need to establish praxis. Park, I think, states the issues well:

> Although everyone properly expects theory to have great practical benefits, the various expectations one encounters are generally undifferentiated, often implicit and unexamined. . . . I especially want to question a particular, current expectation that theory will serve pedagogy in direct, immediate ways. I believe that this expectation, often vague but quite pervasive, risks misunderstanding the basic value of theory and research. In doing so it threatens to distort our conception of composition studies. [p.48]

While nothing equivalent has occurred yet in composition studies that demonstrates dangerous analogical thinking and practical application of theoretical knowledge, one should not be blinded to the dangers inherent in such processes. Gould's account, in his The Mismeasure of Man (1981) of how Alfred Binet's original purpose, to provide a measurement scale for providing limited practical guidance to professionals working with children having special needs, was subverted by the American H. H. Goddard to justify his notions of eugenics is clearly illustrative of the analogical fallacy. As Gould concludes, "If Binet's principles had been followed, and his tests consistently used as he intended, we would have been spared a major misuse of science in our century." [p.155] In his writings, Gould illustrates again and again the social consequences of certain kinds of misguided analogic thinking. The misapplications of Darwinian theory, for example, to other social sciences dramatizes in certain historical instances the dangerous results of misguidance or what Gould calls "mismeasure." Cesare Lombrosco's work in criminal anthropology, for example, illustrates for Gould the ways in

which an 'enlightened' and socially liberal impulse produced a reactionary and anti-human result. Lombrosco believed in an "enlightened" and progressive anthropology and held that, by practicing a preventive criminology through the early identification of physical and behavioral traits, one could eventually eliminate the criminal from society. His methodology, however, contained clearly racist and discriminatory practices and, as Gould notes, "provided a powerful argument for racism and imperialism at the height of Eurpoean colonial expansion." [Gould, ESD pp. 226-227]

Though these examples might seem far-fetched to our situation in Composition Studies, it is not naive to suppose that many "enlightened" theories and claims that purport to improve social activity contain darker, unforseen implications in practice. There are ample instances where "theoretical" claims encourage premature pedagogical application and which are based less upon the urges of expanding community discourse than on consolidating interdisciplinary political influence. I can well imagine less than benign pedagogical consequences for any number of so-called theoretical claims should they be prematurely accepted and implemented. The point of this, insofar as it concerns us, is simply to illustrate "the enormous influence theory often has in fields far removed from its core, and that even proponents of enlightened progress can oftentimes employ a specious theoretical framework. All our research efforts need to be conducted in the context that even a presumably liberating "theory" might well serve as the basis for a deterministic and even reactionary consequence. For the most part, we should leave predictions about the future to demographers and economists, whose

forecasting abilities should keep us sufficiently modest about our own. Perhaps there is some value in Fernand Braudel's observation that "it is hardly surprising then that even during the apparently most explosive period [of the Industrial Revolution] this vital phenomenon made very little impression on the most famous observers of the day." Adam Smith and David Ricardo seem, in retrospect to have been rather poor witnesses to their age. The reasons are complex, but essentially the "revolution" was part of a historical continuum, "stretching back into the past, covering the present, reaching into the future, a continuum in which breaks and discontinuities lose their identities as unique and decisive events." [p.538] Finally, Braudel asks:

> Can 'true' growth (or as some people would call it true development--the word does not much matter) be anything but growth which links together, irreversibly, progress on several fronts at once, creating a mutually sustaining whole which is then propelled on to greater things? [p.539]

For all of us in composition studies I think so--and hope so.

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